

**Religion, Ethnicity and Contested Nationhood in the Former Ottoman Space**, edited by Jørgen Nielsen, Leiden, Brill, 2012 x + 293 pp., €121.00/\$166.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-21133-9

It is hard not to get enthused and excited over this truly excellent book. The Ottoman Empire was in many respects the quintessential multi-cultural realm and its history serves as an important pointer and salutary lesson for contemporary students. The quasi-racial, ethnic, confessional, cultural and national identities were notoriously fluid, and even linguistic designations could change with generations or mislead outside observers. Greek-speaking Muslims, for example, in and from the Peloponnese and the Aegean islands, frequently identified themselves simply as “Turks”, whether or not they understood or spoke the Turkish language. This edited collection is a compendium of distinguished articles regarding faith, patrimony and communal identity in the lands of the former *Imperium Turcicum* by a selection of accomplished European and North American scholars. Whilst the carefully nuanced contributions are all extremely well written and certainly aimed unashamedly at an intelligent audience, the text remains very accessible to most lay readers. This insightful book should be a useful and genuinely informative addition not only to university libraries but to general public libraries, too. The focus is largely on the predilections and developments during the nineteenth century that led ultimately to the death and burial of the “sick man of Europe”, but there are, obviously, brief forays into preceding centuries and discussions of relevant twentieth-century issues and affairs.

The book is divided into 12 chapters by as many authors and starts with a précis that alludes to the aim of the book: “There has been a growing interest in recent years in reviewing the continued impact of the Ottoman empire even long after its demise at the end of the First World War” (1). It was in the very nature of popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography of the east Mediterranean, especially that motivated by nationalism and/or Communism, to adopt an ideological or deeply polemical discourse as the starting point for further discussions on the Turkish imperium. In history, people often fall into virulent binary thinking where neutrality and objectivity exit the narratives rapidly and information is predicated on, and presented in, utterly emotive antithetical texts. Fleming (1999, 3–4) tells the alarming but all too familiar tale of the occasion when she gave a benign paper at an international conference in 1996 that mentioned in passing how the economy of the Aegean islands improved after 1774 in part due to the Ottoman governor Ali Pasha, an acknowledged bully-boy in the regional politics of the era. “After the conference I was accosted by an apoplectic man who said to me sarcastically: My, my, you love him a lot! What do you want, to canonize him?”

Fortunately, the twenty-first century has allowed a variety of more informed and sensible perspectives to prevail, and a younger generation of eastern European academicians in particular have spent 20 years or so deconstructing the unhelpful, parochial, flawed and essentially histrionic historiography of the Socialist period and the preceding nationalist tropes. In a very real sense they have rewritten the histories of their countries and the multiple identities of their folk to forge a more inclusive image of mutually beneficial and overlapping societies. On top of this, naturally, we have the on-going study of the region by more mature scholars, both in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean area itself. In some ways this anthology under review should come as no surprise.

In the final analysis this book convincingly argues that in many respects the post-Ottoman national boundaries that evolved from the late nineteenth century are as hopelessly artificial as those imposed on Africa at the same time. Nielsen's authors demonstrate that the Ottoman regime sought to

modernize itself, but in ascribing – or perhaps conjuring – confessional categories, concentrating authority in the centre (undermining age-old regional power bases and networks), and pursuing the entirely sensible idea of governing the state in one uniform language – Turkish – it inadvertently contributed to and speeded up the evolution of ethnic, sectarian and nationalist solidarities. This conflation of fraternal and communal identities led to genuine confusion and political exacerbation among both the administrative elite and the citizenry themselves. Clearly the ambiguities and complications inherent in the legal classification of any population and their heritage are amplified when ethnic, linguistic and religious distinctions are formally enunciated and enumerated. Furthermore, perhaps ironically, since they were the core centrifugal social constituency of this cross-national and multi-faceted realm, these reform measures placed the Muslims at a distinct disadvantage for a long time. Disparate groups that shared no language, no racial ties, no geographic spaces or physiological links found themselves inside the same hegemonic bracket. The Slavic Muslims of Bosnia and the Albanians, for example, were tabulated with the Shi'a Arabs and Kurds along the Persian border. Even the exact definition and meaning of the much-used word "millet" (nation, nationality or community) is open to some divergent subjective evaluation and modern researchers have initiated much debate on this point alone.

Above all else, this erudite book is articulate in substance and a real joy to read. One certainly hopes it will appeal to the wide readership it deserves. The structure and choice of contributors serve the editor's purpose to undermine the traditional Cowboys-and-Indians historiography that has dominated studies of the *Devlet-i Âliyye-i Osmâniyye* since its ascent many centuries ago, and the true complexity and multi-layered nature of Ottoman society is laid bare, with succinct clarity.

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## Reference

- 1. Fleming, K. E. 1999. *The Muslim Bonaparte: Diplomacy and Orientalism in Ali Pasha's Greece*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.